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ABSTRACT

The topic of black dialect, a timely concern in education and society, should include an understanding of the relationship between language and culture and an understanding of the differences within ethnic and environmental influences contributing to linguistic diversity. Characteristics in black dialect which reflect its descent from African pidgin are evident in its African-based syntax, especially the verb system. A good example of black English as a dialect with a structure and origin of its own may be seen in Gullah, a language spoken by isolate blacks in the Carolina sea islands. The accusation that black dialect is a sloppy, careless speech must be refuted, but speakers of black dialect should be taught to be bidialectal in order to be prepared to function effectively in middle American society. (JM)

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"Black English: Africanisms In Western Culture"

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"Black English: Africanisms In Western Culture"

Quoting from the words of Imamu Amiri Baraka, "We Know Directions"

We know directions. They are wide and bright for the faintly visionary
They are roads, clearly marked, if you looking. Like shouted ideologies. Fast and loose, if y u say east, we have at least some movement you know? But then the general direction becomes itself a randomness, if steps are not firmly placed and some focus is not brought, to bear upon some singular particular place.

To do is too general. To go is also. To be is saying nothing. We want to know we must know just what you are going to do when you get to that exact place you must get to for that action to have meaning. We need facts, figures, precision and skill. It is work and study that will change the world. The rest is clearly bullshit.¹

My purpose here today is to do away with the bullshit attributed to the vernacular Black English. As language teachers, we must be conscious of the need to reshape our attitudes toward speakers as: having lazy lips and lazy tongues; poor auditory discrimination; an inferior cognitive development; sloppy speech patterns to the point of simplifying Standard English; and the most misleading assumption of them all ■ that Blacks are "non-verbal." Non verbal by whose criteria might one ask. The irony here is that those Blacks who receive this negative criticism are masters at signifying, rapping, toasts,

¹Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), "We Know Directions," Black World, May 1973, p. 40.

the dozens and just plain ole rhythmic poetry as revealed in this poem:

Watermelon Vendor's Cry

Watermelon! Watermelon! Red to the rind,
If you don't believe me jest pull down your blind!
I sell to the rich,
I sell to the po';
I'm gonna sell the lady
Standin' in that do'.
Watermelon, Lady!
Come and git your nice red watermelon, Lady!
Red to the rind, Lady!
Come on, Lady, and get 'em!
Gotta make the picnic fo' two o'clock
No flat tires today.
Come on, Lady!
I got water with the melon, red to the rind!
If you don't believe it jest pull down your blind.
You eat the watermelon and preee-serve the rind!

This rhythm and symmetry in rhyme are typical of the verbal creativity of Blacks. They're so creative they can manipulate structures of the language to give human insults as in these three examples of signifying:

1. You're so cross-eyed you can set on the front porch and count the chickens in the backyard.
2. Your family eats like a rabbit: Jump over breakfast, skip lunch, and hop over dinner.
3. You ain't got no mama you got two bald headed daddys.

Expressions of this kind are used on the popular T. V. Show "Good Times" by Jimmy Walker, the character "J. J." Despite ample evidence of verbal creativity, further attacks on Blacks' use of the language was perpetuated by

educational psychologist, Carl Bereiter and Siegfried Engelman, in 1966, who contend that Black children had no language at all and the speech forms that did exist were nothing more than a series of emotional cries, that is, the language is a non-logical mode of expression. A very invalid theory only significant to further substantiate their negative myths that Blacks are genetically inferior--a position vulnerable to attack by linguists who were and still are aware according to William Labov that Educational psychologists know very little about language and even less about Black English speakers; therefore, Labov concludes that the concept of verbal deprivation has no basis in social reality.² To further avoid such misconceptions among teachers and educators, linguists find it necessary to expose the facts of a West African-heritage for the Black dialect in order to get on with the business of ethnolinguistics, sociolinguistics and the attitudes that shape these microlinguistic and metalinguistic concerns.

Black English is a meaningful topic of concern in today's education and society. Those involved in the profession have to rid themselves of personal biases or prejudices through an "awareness" of the historical implications for the Black vernacular. This awareness should include an understanding between language and culture and an understanding of the differences within ethnic and environmental

² William Labov, "The Logic of Non-Standard English," The Florida F. L. Reporter, Vol. 7, No. 1, (1969), p. 60

influences that contribute to linguistic diversity.

The concern of dialect differences reached its peak in the '60's when many older linguists became concerned about the structure of the Black Dialect and whether this structure represents patterns of Standard American English or whether these patterns are in fact retentive forms from a West African Heritage.

Black Dialect is a vernacular language style characteristic of many inner-city Blacks. However, this style is not spoken only by Blacks.³ Today, this vernacular is a part of other ethnic groups including middle America through the use of lexical items dig, rap, right on, etc. Technically, lexical items represent "style"--an important distinction in Black Dialect whose forms inevitably became part of the mass culture because of associative-acculturation. Black dialect is a socially stigmatized form which by some linguists is considered a separated language from English; yet, others are not sure but they do agree that this unique dialect has a form and structure of its own with a system controlled by an outstanding semantic difference.

Jean Malmstrom, a noted linguist defines a dialect as a variety of language spoken by a distinct group of people in a definite place. This difference shows in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar from other varieties of the same

³Juanita V. Williamson, "A Look At Black English," The Crisis, August 1971, p. 173

language. But, to distinguish language from a dialect is difficult. It is distinguishable only by the fact that a dialect is enough like another form of speech in syntax, vocabulary and historical devices to be understandable to speakers of the particular language. (Since a dialect is commonly thought of as "a 'corrupt' form of a language").⁴ Therefore, the question of Black English being a separate language i.e. where differences outweigh the similarities is by some authorities still unanswered; thus the preference of Black Dialect to Black English, however, others have analyzed it historically, as never being the same as Standard English. Its forms are creolized from West African heritage of Pidgin Languages and therefore has syntactic, grammatical and phonological interferences of such. You must be aware that dialects differ only because of separate cultures or speech communities and this difference narrows as cultures begin to merge or mix. Today, many attitudes toward the Black Dialect are undergoing change, in fact attention to the Black Dialect no longer receives the precedence it received in the 1900's. This turn in attitude and concern reflects progress and depth in research regarding cultural identity for the structure of the Black dialect. There is hardly any doubt among linguists that the Black dialect is a creolized form of early African Pidgins. The outstanding question now is whether the Black Dialect is presently going through a

⁴Jean Malmstrom, "Dialects - Updated," The Florida F. L. Reporter, Vol. 7, No. 1 (1969) p. 47

stage of decreolization, i.e. becoming more in structure and form like standard American English.

Recent studies of Afro-American dialects suggests that the deep grammar of Black English reflects a creole predecessor developing from an ancient pidgin language. Pidgin languages are those which evolve to meet a communication emergency when two groups of people speaking different languages are forced to talk together, thus a pidgin is invented as a means of communication. Therefore, this invention exist as a lingua-franca and is not the native language of either group. The result is a mixed language with a simplified version of the grammar of one language into which is inserted the vocabulary of the other language. Pidgin English originated on the West Coast of Africa where traders deliberately mixed slaves from various tribes, each speaking a different African language. Later, when these slaves came to America, they brought these pidgin forms with them and these forms became their creolized mother tongue, their native and only language.⁵ This deep structure is still retained in present day Black Dialect especially in the verb system. Although the vocabulary is English, yet it is in syntax and not words that the real relationship appear. Through isolation of this ethnic culture, we have one full-fledged type of creole English in.

⁵William A. Stewart, "Sociolinguistic Factors In The History of American Negro Dialects," The Florida F. L. Reporter, Vol. 5, No. 2, (Spring 1967), pp. 2-3

existence today--^{*}Gullah, the language spoken by Blacks in the Carolina Sea Islands. Since the grammatical structures of language are highly resistant to change while vocabulary is not, the Black Dialect we have today is the residue of a system of language with an African based syntax and an Anglo-based lexicon. Dr. Lorenzo Dow Turner, a Black linguist is responsible for discovering this West African characteristic in our cultural patterns and he, thereby, discredited the Archaic-English theory, that certain speech-forms used by Blacks were left-overs from Archaic English preserved in the speech of early English settlers in America and copied by their slaves. Present theories in language prove that when anyone learns a new language it is quite customary for them to try to speak the new language with the sound and structure of the old. So is the case in Gullah and Black English. Social and geographical isolation reinforce the tendency to retain old language habits; therefore, we can refute the accusation that the Black Dialect is "sloppy" careless speech. It is a dialect with a form and structure of its own not to be analyzed by the pattern and structure of Standard English. This attempt violates the semantic principles of both languages because of the difference in structure and origin. To judge Black Dialect otherwise would be prejudicial toward stigmatizing its speakers. As a result in history, we conclude that Black speakers are not "leaving off" ~~■~~ sounds by consonant reduction and omissions. Research reveals that West African languages have almost no consonant clusters. They simplify by cutting a series of two consonants down to one. For example, jus

for just, pas for past; this and other similar structures according to one linguist is a feature of Black dialect and is the Gullah adaptation of Standard English. So in judging Black dialect, "How can the speaker "leave off" something he never had? " Language is inseparable from culture--a marriage that establishes a salient point for any divergent existence. Therefore in language teaching, the attitude of the teacher toward this inseparable relationship is very significant. He must first realize that all languages spoken by more than one person have dialects. Dialects develop by natural processes beyond the reach of coercive methods to control and these dialects are specific to particular social groups and to particular areas.

Many linguists today contend that there is no "Standard English" as contrasted with dialects. Standard English is a relative term usually defined with prejudice implications as reflected in Charles C. Fries' definition (paraphrased):

Standard English is the language of educated people and the
language of people in power who run this country

Now! We all know that speech patterns by some of our leader cannot be marked "Standards." Just listen to state governors, some politicians, local officials, etc. often times there is much to be desired in their speech patterns. Therefore we can conclude, however, because of these observations that there are only more culturally valued or more socially prestigious (still a value judgement), more formal dialects of a language but that no one dialect can be judged as

better than another; any other view simply reflects the biases and stereotypes of those who hold it.

According to Raven I. McDavid, a leading dialectologist, we cannot overemphasize the culture and social dimensions of language. Respect should be given and shown to both sides. With this attitude, we as teachers should be concerned not to denigrate the vernacular of our Black Dialect speakers; instead, we should foster every effort to teach them standard American English for socioeconomic and political reasons. We know that in our society dialect discriminating reflects social class distinction, but for Blacks the problem is compounded by racial discrimination. Regardless of these core prejudices, we should prepare Black Dialect speakers to function effectively in the society of middle America by making them proficiently bidialectal--for bidialectalism is their key to mobility in this pluralistic society. Language is a tool, a tool as a weapon and it must be used as such. In our efforts to prepare Black Dialect speakers to cope with this existing fact, we must instill in them that "Difference does not equal inferiority." We must not overlook the relevance of what we believe as stated in the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis:

"Language is Culture--one's language is the sum total of how he views the world"

These cultural patterns are deeply rooted and they are very significant to all language expressions. Paramount in all our endeavors, we must acknowledge

the merits of our experiences and our research (linguists) for revealing through our cultural identity that language systems that are different are not necessarily deficient.

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